Nobody Else But Me

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/6988780.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Categories:	F/M, M/M
Fandoms:	The Avengers (Marvel) - All Media Types, Genghis Khan - Miike Snow (Music Video)
Relationship:	Steve Rogers/Tony Stark
Characters:	Steve Rogers, Tony Stark, Pepper Potts, Phil Coulson, Natasha Romanov, Jarvis, Sharon Carter, Sam Wilson, James "Rhodey" Rhodes
Additional Tags:	Pining, Fluff, Villain Tony Stark, Spy Steve Rogers, Alternate Universe, Enemies to Lovers, Pranks and Practical Jokes
Language:	English
Collections:	Captain America/Iron Man Reverse Bang 2016
Stats:	Published: 2016-05-28 Words: 18,921 Chapters: 1/1

Nobody Else But Me

by Amonae

Summary

Iron Man and the Captain have been side-stepping each other at every turn, a villain and spy locked in a constant samba. But SHIELD is growing impatient, and Iron Man is losing face in the eyes of his men--both Steve and Tony find themselves in too deep before even realizing the stakes.

A spy AU based on the music video "Genghis Khan" by Miike Snow. Done for the 2016 Cap-IM RBB.

Notes

Artwork: I would not be here, writing this amazing fic without the beautiful artwork from the fanTASTIC nat-draws-things. It has been such an immense pleasure to work with you, and I can't wait to do it again some time! Find the art post here~!

Thank Yous: I have to thank my lovely betas--Kuchen, Antigrav Vector, Veldeia, and Morphia. Without you guys, this thing would just be one huge mess. Thank you to Antigrav Vector and Morphia for helping me out with the "prank war" ideas! Another big thank you to dapperanachronism and teaberryblue for helping me sort out the ending, they are always my least favorite part to write! And to everyone in the cap-im community, for all the hand holding and encouraging words, I couldn't have done this without you guys. <3

Things were going well, extremely well, all avenues considered. There was a *teensy* hiccup involving an explosive device activating *perhaps* a few seconds too soon, but that was something he could work with.

After all, they always sent in the big guns when he made a particularly beautiful mess of things.

“Iron Man!”

Right on time.

As per usual, Captain Rogers looked impeccable, despite the stupid half-mask he insisted on wearing when confronting villains in public. Like anyone would have a hard time recognizing that chiseled jaw and those bright baby blues, not to mention the God-like physique. Well, let’s not get side-tracked.

“Ah, Captain. Thought you had forgotten about our little date.”

“Afraid I was held up. Seems there was a waterline break on Sixth.”

“Oops?”

“Why don’t you come down here and we can discuss the terms of your surrender?” The Captain shielded his eyes from the late afternoon sun with the edge of his hand, peering up the slant of dark marble to where Tony was perched, lounging.

Tony stood, just enough to glance over the edge of the carved arm, a tilted smirk in place on his features. He took a quick survey of their surroundings, and made a mental note of the locations of all other agents before lifting the edge of his own mask, an artful array of gold and crimson. Watching as honeyed brows arched high, Tony gave a quick wink to the man before sliding the visor back into place. “Hm… I don’t think so, Captain. Not today. I’m feeling a bit more ambitious than that. What do you say we have a little match? You like chess, right?”

He waved a hand, lazily, with a dramatic side-step at the end to bring attention to the oversized chessboard he’d set up in the Central Park greenspace. On each tile was a person, immobile. The sight itself wasn’t so odd, there were entire tournaments dedicated to life-sized chess matches, but each of these people were frozen as though in fear. Tony watched as the Captain’s eyebrows slanted down, disappearing beneath the edge of his dark mask.

“Iron Man. Let the civilians go.” His voice was hard, stern, and with just enough of an edge Tony thought it might cut him, should he let it.

“Come on, where’s the fun in that? You win, I let all the nice people go. I win, hm… Well, I’ll decide when that happens,” he teased, shifting his position in the elaborate throne on the black side of the board.

“If.”

“Pardon?”

“*If* that happens. *If* you win.” The Captain was still glowering, even as he took his own position on the opposite side of the board.

Tony beamed, lips curling at the edges until what was visible of his face was shifted into an undeniable smirk. “Right. Well, white moves first,” he offered with a wave of his hand.

“Pawn to C4.”

The piece moved easily, the sound of gears and shifting metal tiles sliding the human statue along. Tony could see the displeasure warping the Captain’s features. It was perfect.

After nearly an hour, Tony realized his mistake. He’d slipped up twelve moves ago, when he had been too concentrated on the downward tilt of bitten-red lips to see that he had mistakenly called out his move.

“All right, Captain, well played. You’ve bested me. I suppose I can let the civilians go.” Even as Tony was fiddling with the knobs and dials on his chair he could see the Captain stalking across the board, avoiding people who tumbled from precarious poses, aiding those who fell. His shoulders were squared, tense, and there was a twitch in his jaw from clenching his teeth. It gave Tony far too much pleasure to see how much he could rile the man up, how little it took on his part.

“Iron Man. You’re coming with me,” he snarled, already reaching for what Tony had to assume would be some kind of containment device.

“That’s no way to ask someone out, Captain,” Tony lilted, lounging in the huge marble chair as though he didn’t have a care in the world. “Try again. Maybe add a please?”

A rumbling growl was the only response he got, and Tony could feel it all the way to his toes. He was halfway out of the chair when he heard the near-silent whisper of an engine. Tony grinned.

“Hate to cut and run, Captain. Really. Such a shame. But I’m afraid I’m needed elsewhere,” he chimed, lifting a hand to the air, palm and fingers outstretched. The Captain looked about ready to clamber up the steep edge of the chair when Tony felt the first brush of metal against the tips of his digits. He clasped his hand around the bottom rung of the ladder, invisible to the naked eye, and grinned. “Until next time, oh Captain, my Captain.”

“Iron Man!” The Captain shouted, stretching out in a valiant attempt to grab hold of a shiny black boot before it was whisked out of reach.

Tony wriggled his fingers in an approximation of a wave, face plastered with a huge grin as his body was lifted into the air, seemingly by nothing. “Later, Captain. I do enjoy our chats. Let’s not wait so long before the next one.” He continued a cheery wave until the Captain was little more than a pale dot against the dark granite of the throne.

+++

Surveying the length of Central Park that was still covered in mechanical tiles and slabs of decorative marble, Steve could feel the definite press of a headache at his temples. He scrubbed a hand across his face before barking orders at the junior agent hovering near his side.

“Williams. Get the team out here to start disassembling this board. I want this thing out of here within five hours, understood?”

“Yes, sir!” The young man all but yelped, darting off between members of the gathering crowd, seeking out the other agents who were trying to simultaneously contain the situation and garner

information from the individuals who had been frozen.

This happened every time with Stark, and every time they lacked the ability to bring him in. It was beginning to wear on him, more than Steve wanted to let on, that this rich playboy of a man was eluding them at every turn. What was worse—they lacked substantial enough evidence to bring the man in on proper grounds, since the only one who had seen Iron Man's true face was Steve.

The first time had been an accident, the result of a fist fight in too-close quarters. Iron Man had been caught breaking into a secure facility with what appeared to be a battalion of tiny robots at his command, though what he was attempting to steal from an exhibit on postcolonial France was beyond Steve. Despite the fact that Iron Man had brought plenty of his goons with him, Steve had managed to break away past them and into the small room where the super villain had been hiding. Up until that point, he had only seen security footage and grainy photos of the man in question, so he was taken aback to say the least.

Iron Man was leaning against a glass display of men's fashion, his own deep blue suit fitting perfectly to the trim lines of his body. He was casually relaxed, but Steve could see the weapon curled within the palm of his right hand, emitting a soft azure glow.

"Call it quits, Iron Man. Before somebody gets hurt."

"Oh my, was that a threat?" Steve almost felt insulted that only half the man's attention seemed to be directed at him, his gaze still focused on whatever it was his bots were doing to the locked door at the back of the room. It didn't much matter, Steve would take whatever openings he could get.

He launched forward, hoping to have speed and surprise on his side, though from the looks of Iron Man, his size would be an advantage as well. What he hadn't expected was that the villain would be so *quick*. Iron Man twisted out of his path seconds before his hit landed and Steve barely had time to reel back before the impact connected with the glass casing instead.

With a raised brow, the edges of his over-the-top mask glinting gold in the security lights, Iron Man clicked his tongue. "Rude."

Steve barely had the time to turn before the glowing disk in Iron Man's hand was pointed directly at him, a high-pitched whine announcing what was sure to be one hell of a blast. He ducked low, swooping forward with his leg, managing to upset the villain's balance enough that he lowered the gauntlet. It was only a second, but a second was all Steve needed. He rushed forward again, not giving himself time to analyze the situation before his forearm connected with Iron Man's stomach. There was a brief scuffle and at some point, Steve heard the sound of metal hitting the floor. He assumed it was the weapon but a moment later he saw the subtle glow at the corner of his eye and felt the cold press of iron against his temple.

"Now, let's not do anything rash. Don't move."

It was an awkward position to hold for any length of time, even with the very real possibility of death as a consequence. Steve was crouched, halfway through a low turn, and Iron Man was hovering just outside his field of vision, somewhere to his right. Steve shifted, just to take some of the pressure off his knees, when he heard the harsh intake of breath.

"Do. Not. Move. Or I will blow your god damned head off." Iron Man's voice wavered and Steve took a risk by tilting his head just enough to see the other man's face—which was no longer obscured by the gaudy red-and-gold iron mask that was his trademark. Instead, he was met by a

handsome man, somewhere around forty with a combination of shock, outrage, and fear flickering across his features. There was an inkling of familiarity about Iron Man's appearance, perhaps in the immaculate style of his facial hair, but Steve couldn't place it.

He filed the thought away for when he didn't have a miniaturized blaster pressed against the side of his skull.

They stayed like that until the arches of Steve's feet started to tingle from holding his position and the silence between them was broken by the click of the security door that the bots had been processing. That drew Iron Man's attention and he jabbered a series of numbers and letters that made little sense to Steve, but the next thing he knew, the little bots were coming at *him* instead.

Iron Man stepped away, lifting his mask from where it had fallen to the floor and securing it to his face with a flick of the wrist. When he looked to Steve, the cocky grin was back in place as though it had never faltered.

"I'd love to stay and chat, but I'm sure you're a busy man."

Steve growled from his position, now belly-down on the floor, where the little monstrosities were restraining him. He could just barely make out Iron Man's retreating back from the corner of his eye. "You won't get away with this."

The villain paused, foot halfway through a step, before he shot a quick look over his shoulder. "Oh, but I already have."

It had been embarrassing enough to be caught by a villain after several years on the job, more-so because it took his fellow agents nearly two hours to figure out how to disarm the small army of robots without causing them to backfire. By the time he got out of there he was damned and determined to figure out why Iron Man had looked so familiar.

He realized it the second he turned on the evening news and saw billionaire Tony Stark walking the red carpet event of the week, with a huge, falsely-cocky grin on his face. Fury said it wasn't enough, they couldn't take down the biggest power in weapons manufacturing without sufficient, *court-admissible* evidence. So Steve tried to find a way to get the evidence they needed, taking on nearly every case Iron Man was involved with in order to try and piece it together. However, the only thing he got out of it were a series of un-masked winks from Stark—always when no one else was around, as though he *knew* what Steve was up to—and the very real possibility of a stomach ulcer.

It was infuriating, is what it was.

Steve was busying himself with a printing kit on the ebony throne, though he knew it would come back with no results—Stark may be cocky but he wasn't an idiot—when he felt the phantom pressure of a gaze on his right shoulder. Without looking, he let out a little sigh. "You can tell Fury we didn't get him. Again." His voice growled a bit at the end and Steve clenched his jaw to keep any more of his displeasure from seeping through to his tone.

"Not why I'm here," a smooth female voice responded and Steve took his eyes off the task at hand to look at her. Hands settled against slim hips, canted gently to the left, Natasha seemed a picture of

ease and calm, though Steve would bet money that a million thoughts were whispering beneath her gentle crimson curls.

When an answer obviously wasn't forthcoming, Steve heaved a sigh and stood up. "Okay, I'll bite. What is it this time?"

She pulled a slim manilla envelope from the sleeve of her jacket, holding it between two fingers as though it weren't worth the effort of carrying. "Fury seems to think you have a better shot of bringing him in than most. Myself included."

Steve tried not to wince at the insinuation that he was somehow more suitable of an agent than Romanoff, the very woman who had trained him, but he took the envelope from her fingers and opened it as he spoke. "I don't see how that can be the case, since he's managed to get away from me every time since day one."

"True," she answered, a hint of amusement in her tone. "But he seems to have…a *thing*, for you."

"A thing?" Steve muttered, only half paying attention as he read over the lines of printed text. "What do you mean a 'thing'?" His brows furrowed and he read it again, just to be sure he understood. "And, pardon my language, but what the hell is this?"

There was a definite smirk on her lips and it unsettled him nearly as much as the contents of the letter itself. "A proposal, Captain."

+++

"Honey, I'm ho-ome."

The workshop was suspiciously quiet as Tony stepped down the few stairs into the lowered floor-space. He shucked his outer jacket before tugging at the top buttons of his shirt, fingers brushing along the section of gold inlay within his chest. After a few mindless taps to the heated metal, he glanced around the open space.

"All right, very good. I don't see you. You can come out now, though. There's work to do," he called, voice a tangle of exasperated fondness.

Within seconds, there were a series of soft beeps followed by the whirr of rubber wheels on concrete as a small robot, not much more than an appendage on a swivel base, came rolling across the room. There was a large 'U' stenciled onto the side of a piston, a slight scratch through the paint that he had yet to repair. Tony's brows furrowed. "Where's the other one?"

The bot tilted its 'head'—a camera attached to the end of a strut—while Tony moved through the concrete room at a brisk pace. He was sure that the other robot had gotten itself stuck or was intentionally being difficult, either way, his patience was quickly thinning.

"DUM-E, come on now. Don't make me junk you for spare parts."

There was a short noise behind one of the larger machines, the sound of metal hitting metal, before a soft, orange ball came rolling toward Tony's feet. He narrowed his eyes, crouching to pick it up. "We're not playing. We're working. You remember working, it's where you hold things perfectly still and don't throw them across the room in a fit."

A series of digital chirps sounded that could almost be sad, if they weren't associated with a rather large claw attached to an out-of-date computer. Which had finally come out of hiding, joint tilted at a downward angle as it continued the series of depressed trills.

"Stop that. No pouting. We have work to do."

"Talking to yourself again, sir?"

Tony stood and turned, face blooming into a grin as he flung his arms open in a broad gesture. "Rhodey, my favorite henchman!"

"I thought we talked about calling me a henchman." James Rhodes, best friend and ex-colonel, was giving him that flat look that held irritation and amusement in the same narrowed gaze. His hand was resting on the strap of his shoulder bag, drawing Tony's attention.

"Oh, come on, you love it. Now…" Tony smirked as he sidled closer, feet tapping an excitable rhythm on the concrete. "What did you bring me?"

With a roll of his eyes, Rhodes reached into the bag at his side and retrieved a small disk in a thin plastic case. "Not really sure why you want this."

Tony let out a barely-restrained snort before snatching the case deftly from the other man's hands. "For my next big plan, obviously." He quickly popped out the CD and tossed it into the nearest tray. "Load that one up, J. You know the drill."

"Of course, sir."

"Do I even want to know?"

"No, probably not," he answered, already halfway across the room, humming a quiet tune and picking up a series of tools as he went. The bots were trailing behind him, DUM-E adding his own set of chirrups to the melody. Tony glanced over his shoulder, frowning a bit when he saw Rhodes awkwardly loitering at the edge of the workshop. "Something else you have to tell me?"

"Pepper's asking when you're coming up for dinner."

"Shit, what time is—" he glanced at the clock, "—shit." Tony pried a wrench from U's grip, dumping the rest of his supplies onto a metallic worksurface. "Can you…can you stall her? Just a little?"

"Tony," Rhodey's voice was quiet, gently chiding. The tone he saved for moments of extreme disapproval.

Tony groaned and scrubbed a hand across his Van Dyke. "Just…just fifteen minutes? I need to get this started or it'll take all night to run the numbers and—"

He watched as Rhodey heaved a sigh, his hands raising a little in mock-surrender. "Okay, okay. I'll buy you some time. But hurry it up."

With a quick wave of his hand, Tony was back to paying attention to the series of wires he was soldering into intricate framework. He barely even noticed when Rhodes left the room.

“Sir? I believe it has been longer than the allotted ‘fifteen minutes’.”

“Huh? No, J. It’s been five, max. Don’t bother me. I’m busy.” Tony hunched over the relay he was attempting to re-route and revise when there was the soft sound of the AI clearing its proverbial throat.

“Sir, Miss Potts is at the workshop door. Shall I let her in?”

He fumbled the soldering iron, immediately dropping it and cutting the power with a wave of his hand before sucking the injured digit into his mouth. “*What*? No! Don’t let her in, for Christ’s sake, what do I pay you for?”

“I don’t believe my wages were ever appropriated, sir.”

“Smart ass. Why didn’t you tell me she was coming downstairs?” Tony hurried toward the door at a quick pace, hoping to beat her into the workshop proper before she started getting suspicious. He’d just reached the paneled door, pushing it open into the storage space at the back of the main shop, when he heard the click of her heels on the concrete.

“I did. Every eight-point-oh-four seconds, to be precise.”

He ignored the less-than-polite remark curdling on his tongue, catching sight of sleek ginger hair curled into an elaborate updo. Shit. Not the usual, precise, bun but a feminine and intricate display that probably meant tonight had been an Important Event. Tony desperately shuffled through his thoughts—sifting through the new algorithms and ideas for SI, along with his much more entertaining ideas regard a certain Captain—in an attempt to recall exactly what he was about to be in trouble for this time.

“Pep! Pepper-pot! Light of my life! I’m sorry, I got side-tracked,” he crooned, making a show of wiping the oil from his hands, ignoring the pain in his index finger from the minor burn.

She rounded on him, lips pulled thin. Oh no, he had really fucked up this time. “Tony,” Pepper didn’t sound mad, though there was a tinge of an ache in her voice, as though she had just been crying. “Did you really forget?”

He wracked his useless brain for something to provide, a reason that the date was so important. “Ah, no. I just got distracted. I would never forget our…” Tony trailed off, his arms opening as he forced a somewhat casual smile onto his lips. “Our…”

“Anniversary, Tony.” She was frowning at him now, brows furrowed and arms crossed in a definite display of closed-off attitude across her chest.

Oh. Shit.

“Of course,” he tried, knowing even as he said it his facade was faltering, and if he knew it, Pepper knew it. “I didn’t forget. I just, may have—”

“It’s fine, Tony,” she interrupted, holding up a fine-boned hand wearily. “I shouldn’t have expected anything else.”

He winced. True, he was known for bungling things at the best of times, but he always hoped, had always *tried* to at least keep things together where Pepper was involved. But, in typical Stark

fashion, he was fucking it up all over again. “No, Pep, it’s not,” he sighed, raking a hand through his hair and causing it to stand at wild attention. Tony took a cautious step toward her, trying to keep his posture as relaxed as possible even though his mind was buzzing with possible solutions and outcomes for every little action, every word. “How can I make it up to you?”

There it was, the slightest smile, some of the tension in her mouth receding. “You can start by coming up for dinner. I’m sure it’s cold by now.”

“For you, Pepper Pot,” he purred, moving to slip an arm about her waist and feeling the taut lines of her body relax, if only a fraction, “I’ll eat a thousand lukewarm dinners.”

“Such a charmer, Mister Stark.”

+++

Steve glowered at the letter. He turned it over, fiercely ignored it for fifteen minutes before flipping it again. There were a few drips of coffee staining the creamy parchment, just shy of the raised eagle, the official seal. He had twisted the options over in his mind, the alternative routes that they could take from this, but from SHIELD’s point of view, there was no other way.

They needed to take Iron Man down—and, apparently, they needed Steve to do it.

It was simple enough, as far as plans went: allow himself to be taken captive and earn the trust of the man behind the mask, enough to set him at ease. And then, when things seemed to be going accordingly, he was to call in reinforcements, catch Stark off-guard. Steve wasn’t sure that Stark was ever off-guard—even at press conferences, under intense public scrutiny, the man had never let a single emotion slip that wasn’t intentional—and he was even less sure that he was the man for the job.

He didn’t approve of their methods, it seemed underhanded and shady, even for an organization that specialized in stealth and special ops. They hadn’t given him much room for opinions on the matter, that much had been made clear when he tried to bring it up with Fury and then again with Natasha. He’d had the proverbial door closed in his face both times, their faces shuttering into an a-typical professional emotional range—which meant they were flat-out lying to him. Something else was at play here, something they weren’t letting Steve in on, and though it had happened before with other cases, this time, it irritated him.

The bell above the diner’s door chimed, Steve lifting his eyes from where he was re-reading paragraph three for the thousandth time to see who it was. Wearing a pale tee shirt and running shorts, looking every bit as though he’d just finished up a ten mile jog, was Sam Wilson. He flashed a charming grin to the waitress as his eyes skimmed across the small room. Steve felt the edge of a weary smile on his lips as he waved the man over, re-folding the memo and tucking it back into the lining pocket of his jacket.

“Could you find a place more out of the way?” Sam offered with a chiding tone as he slumped ungracefully into the booth, folding his arms across his chest.

“Best pancakes in Brooklyn,” Steve answered with a grin.

“Yeah, we’ll see about that.”

The waitress swung by again, took their orders, and disappeared just as quick. By the time Sam had a coffee in front of him, he was giving Steve a look of patient anticipation. Steve took a breath.

“I don’t know if I like this new job.”

“What d’ya mean? You’ve been feeling pretty good about it so far, right?”

“Yeah, but…” Steve paused, trying to find an accurate way to word it. Sam had been his therapist for years after his time serving, helped him work through all the dark thoughts in his head to sift out the good again. Now, he was a close friend, one Steve counted on to keep his head above water when things were getting shaky. Even with all that history, he couldn’t tell Sam what was really bugging him, couldn’t let on about his real career path. So he needed to chose his words carefully. “They’ve got me on this new gig, a new client. And I don’t like the way they want to move forward with him. It feels…almost too pushy?”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Sam took another swig of his coffee, loaded up with way too much cream. “You push hard, you get results, right? More sales are good, Steve.”

“But the way they want me to get them, it’s…” *Underhanded, immoral, dangerous*, “...not exactly by the books.”

There was a pause, Sam lowering his coffee and tracing the path of the handle with the flat of his thumb. “They askin’ you to do something illegal?” His voice had a hard edge, that subtle protectiveness that was so quintessentially *Sam* that it made Steve smile.

“Nah, nothing like that. Just makes me feel a bit uneasy, you know?”

“Well, you know what I’m always telling you,” Sam offered just as the waitress came by with their plates, depositing heaping stacks of pancakes before them. There was a grin on Sam’s lips. “Go with your gut."

Steve’s gut told him that this was a bad idea from square one. His gut also told him that there was no way that Stark could have known about SHIELD’s plan, no way he could have been alerted. Yet, here Steve was, standing in the middle of the Empire State building’s main deck, attempting to command a series of flustered agents while maintaining his own calm demeanor.

It was difficult, considering the entirety of one hundred and two floors were swarming with small, mechanical rodents. Complete with twitching, fluffy tails.

Squirrels.

God, if he never looked at a squirrel again it would be too soon.

The worst part was that this had been a remote attack, no sign of Iron Man other than the little red and gold logo on the damnable bots. This not only pushed back the plan of attack, but sent little roils of frustration through Steve’s limbs until he found himself clenching a radio so hard that it crumpled with a high-pitched shriek in his left hand.

Next time. They would get him next time.

False MoMA exhibits for Spy vs Spy, a comic that Steve had enjoyed as a child, followed the disaster at the Empire State Building. Straight after that was a mess with the Statue of Liberty involving copious amounts of candy floss that left Steve's skin sticky for what felt like *weeks* afterwards. He'd barely had time to recover from that particularly traumatic experience when he heard the announcements over the radio, spouting some nonsense about balloons in the subway as a celebration of "The Captain's" birthday. Steve palmed his face and suppressed a groan. If there had been any denying that these stunts were directed at him before, that was all whisked out the window with the last one.

His birthday wasn't even for another three months.

All of these pranks (Steve wouldn't give them any traction by claiming them as anything more than the juvenile stunts that they were) led to the same abrupt conclusion—no Iron Man at any of the launch sites. Everything was maintained and operated by bots or goons, but it didn't matter how many of them SHIELD locked up or took apart; without Iron Man, they were no closer to their goal.

Just as quickly as the childish shenanigans had started, they stopped. No water balloons careening off the towers of the Brooklyn bridge to explode on the unsuspecting vehicles below, no chemically-concocted piña colada scent being pumped through times square on the coldest day of the week, and certainly no billboards advertising a new daytime soap opera that were plastered with Steve's face in various stages of anger. Instead, there was radio silence. No new reports of any Iron Man-related incidents.

It made Steve nervous; felt too much like the calm before a storm.

+++

"This can't be right."

"Sir, I assure you that the numbers are—"

"Run them again," Tony snapped, glowering as he watched the blue-green cycle of algorithms flow across the screen. No matter which way he looked at the information processing in front of him, it all came up with the same result.

Someone was stealing his tech.

And not just the general, public-knowledge SI stuff, oh no. That would incur legal battles and media frenzies. Whoever this was, they had found a way to siphon the information off his internal servers, taking pockets of data to create the weaponized monstrosities that stared back at him from satellite photos and clumsy cell phone videos.

"Jarvis, track the info. See if we can find a common source and pinpoint it to the root cause."

"Already on it, sir."

"You're the man, J." With a few quick strides across the workshop, he was settled into his latest project—one he had to put on hold when the less-than-pleasant reveal of an information leak had been brought to his attention. It wasn't as though he needed more on his plate; it was difficult enough trying to balance Stark Industries, a relationship with Pepper, and annoying the living hell out of the Captain (and subsequently, SHIELD).

He had just finished welding the supporting struts to the base when a small alert flashed through the screens. Tony lifted his head and frowned.

“Already?”

“I believe so, sir.”

“Shit, okay,” he mumbled, wheeling his chair away from the workstation to start entering a series of codes into the surrounding computer systems. “Total lockdown. You know the drill.”

“Of course.”

His fingers shook for a moment as he brushed them against the gold plate settled across his sternum, lifting a series of small tools from a nearby workbench and retrieving a single, tiny golden key from the back of a sliding drawer. There was the quiet click of the locking mechanisms on the doors and Tony allowed himself a single, shuddery sigh. “Okay. Let’s get this show on the road.”

Near the back of his workshop, past the arrays of half-finished mechanics and projects not-yet-started, was a long slab of metal arranged into a sloping seat. The angles were odd, but it allowed him to keep a close eye on what he was doing, allowed JARVIS to monitor his vitals even though his heart nearly always shuddered out of control. He hadn’t needed to resort to drastic measures. Yet.

“Alright, let’s make this quick. See if we can break the last record.”

“That’s highly inadvisable, sir.”

“Spoilsport,” he complained with a click of his tongue, lifting the first tiny screwdriver and beginning to remove the small screws that bracketed the golden chestplate. Once they had all been pulled free and settled into a tiny tray at his elbow, Tony picked up the key, twisting it between his digits before slotting it into a section of the plate that had been revealed by loosening the screws. There was a quiet snap, reverberating through his breast, and Tony gave the whole section a good tug. He sucked in a deep breath, feeling the cool air settling against the scarred skin, sweeping over the small device implanted in his sternum. Settling the gold-plated cover aside, he took a moment to examine the puckered skin on his chest. It was ugly, raised and pale pinkish-white, sending crisscrossed patterns loping onto his pectorals. His fingers tapped against the reactor—a small, round device with a pale blue glow and an almost-imperceptible hum—embedded very near to his heart and the only thing keeping the organ from stopping entirely.

Tony took a few moments, letting his digits jitter over the smooth surface in a random tempo before he pulled in a breath. “Right, well.” He picked up the first set of tools, reminding himself sternly that he needed to do the maintenance regularly, no matter how…unpleasant it may be.

A quick pressure and two clicks through the internal locking mechanisms and Tony was quite literally holding his life in his hand. He shifted the cylinder from side to side, swiping at the edges with a file where it looked too sharp, re-applying gels and adjusting the casing where needed. “How’re the internals looking, J?”

“Perfectly normal, sir.”

“Normal, right,” he scoffed, shaking his head a bit before fitting the reactor gently back into the slot in his chest. Three quick adjustments and a turn or two later and it was as though he hadn’t just

pulled a highly advanced piece of technology from the middle of his body. Tony slid off the chair and moved to the small sink at the corner of the room, washing the gel from his hands. “What do we have scheduled for the evening?”

“I believe you have a meeting with a consultant at seven, sir. Other than that, you appear to be free.”

“Let’s get some music going, start this party up right then.” He waved his arm through the air, letting the sounds of rock and roll distract him from the itchy pain of the scar tissue. Yes, he should probably leave the cover off on a more regular basis, let his skin have some proper healing time; the damage to his heart had been so severe he felt the need to constantly protect it, to shield himself. He wasn’t about to expose his largest potential weakness to the world.

Not when Tony didn’t want to admit that weakness to himself.

+++

The attack on Hammer Industries came in the middle of the night. There were no workers, no night security, no nothing. It was as though the whole place had been cleared out on a drill only moments before the whole place went up in smoke. As Steve and Natasha made their way to the scene, he tried to piece together why SHIELD would have been brought in on this one. It seemed to be an explosion related to a gas leak, at least from the initial reports, though Natasha had simply leveled him with a narrow look when he expressed his confusion.

“Things aren’t always what they seem.”

He wasn’t sure what she meant by that until they were on site, surrounded by swarming groups of firefighters and police, reporters and nosy civilians. The damage was extensive, the entire building on the verge of collapse. Supposedly two other warehouses had been hit already, though those had been buried from the media frenzy thus far. There was no distinct pattern to the wreckage, though it seemed both intentional and chaotic. Natasha had taken some samples, but they were no closer to understanding the cause when she picked a scrap of metal from the debris.

“It’s Iron Man,” Natasha offered without any preamble as they stood apart from the crowd, surveying the damage from a distance. She was twisting the chunk of warped scrap in her fingers, fidgeting in a way Steve was unfamiliar with. Her eyes were hard when she glanced to him, seeking a response.

He frowned, brows furrowing. “How do you figure?”

“Anyone else around here who could orchestrate this kind of thing? Simultaneous attacks?” She questioned, brows arched slightly, fingers stilling on the metal in her hands.

The simple answer was no. There weren’t any other active villains in the immediate area and Steve knew that Stark was directly competing with Hammer in the business world. Though to do something so underhanded as to take out a rival company… Steve didn’t like the way the information sat in his gut. It didn’t feel right.

“No, but that doesn’t mean he did it. Could really have been a gas leak.”

She shook her head, a quick motion, before turning back to the dying flames as the firefighters finally got things under control. Her hair flared a bright red in the tail end of the glow and Steve

forced his mind to focus on the facts at hand.

One: for the attacks to occur near-simultaneously, if they weren't incidental, there would have needed to be foresight. Someone would have had to plan out each of the explosions ahead of time, determine which branches of Hammer Industries would suffer the most from the damage.

Two: there would need to be a cover-up fed to the media only seconds after the attacks happened. Those sorts of things could normally be traced back to a source, and if it *was* Stark, tracking the information back to him would prove more than difficult. He was incredibly adept at covering his tracks.

Three: if Stark had been involved, his whereabouts for the evening would be unaccounted for. There would be no records of him in any of his own buildings or workshops, no testimonies from friends or his long-time girlfriend Pepper Potts.

And none of these facts would matter a lick, not until Steve managed, with undeniable proof, to show that Tony Stark and Iron Man were one in the same.

Even when evidence to the contrary piled up around his feet, when they found out that Stark had attended a charity gala while everything was happening at Hammer Industries or that the drones (recovered from one of the warehouse attacks) were unrecognizable when compared to Stark's usual work, Steve felt something wasn't right.

Every other agent at SHIELD was spouting rumors and fueling the flames, the media going crazy over the question of whether the incidents were attacks or not, and Steve wasn't any closer to finding real answers. He didn't believe that Stark would have pulled a stunt like that just because he was trying to wipe out a competitor. It wasn't his style—he was more about finding the one thing that made SI stand out above the rest and then doing it twelve times better than anyone else could have imagined.

Between the investigations into Hammer Industries and the menial tasks SHIELD had him completing on the side, Steve was beginning to find himself wearing thin. There was the constant warning of a headache lurking beneath his temples and he was sure that he was grinding his teeth so hard that even the greenhorns could hear it when they walked by his office.

So when the appearances of both Iron Man and the ridiculous pranks returned, Steve couldn't help but feel relieved.

+++

Maybe the Hammer Industries thing hadn't gone over quite the way he'd planned, but it had served its purpose—Justin Hammer now knew what happened to people who stole his private tech. However, SHIELD seemed more determined than ever to rain on his parade, cutting off his plans at every turn before he'd even managed to develop them to fruition. Tony was beginning to think he had another leak when Rhodey interrupted his train of thought.

"—obsessed."

"What?" Tony asked, flipping up the welding mask and resisting the urge to rub at the soot under his eyes with a grimy hand.

With a roll of his eyes, Rhodes stepped forward and gave the metal face-mask settled on Tony's head two quick raps with his knuckles. "I said you're going at this like a man obsessed. You haven't been eating, haven't been sleeping, and I know you haven't been working on anything new for Stark Industries. Pepper told me the board is pissed."

Tony frowned, resisting the urge to flip the mask back down and resume work as though he hadn't heard his friend at all. "It's just a distraction, Rhodey. You know that. New project, all excited, blah, blah, blah."

"Uh huh. And this new project is…what, exactly?"

There was a pause, a few moments while the villain let the thought roll around in his skull. "Find a way to get SHIELD off my back, obviously."

"Right. Not find a way to get the cute girl with the pigtails to notice you?"

"What?"

"Nevermind." He took a moment to clear his throat. "I just think you're getting too distracted by that Captain guy. He's distracting you from the bigger picture."

Tony snorted. "Come on, that's not true. I'm working on something lovely and evil right now."

"Which is?" Rhodes asked, brow raised.

"...A giant laser pointer? It's automated! Just think of the chaos from all the feral cats!" Tony was grinning until he saw the sombre look on the other man's face and the expression slid right off his features. "What?"

Lifting a shoulder in a slow shrug, Rhodes adjusted the cuff of his uniform. "Nothing. Some of the others are talking, though. Thought you should know."

"Talking? Talking how?" Tony could feel his brows furrowing, feel the anxious wave of concern roiling beneath the gold plate in his chest.

"They think you're going soft."

"*Soft* ?!" He shrieked, leaping up from his crouched position at the workbench and nearly dropping the welding torch in the process. JARVIS had the presence of mind to cut the power before it slipped in his grasp. "Why the hell are they thinking *that*?"

Rhodey gave him a flat look. "Really, Tones?"

Oh good. The nickname always meant that Rhodes thought he was being a great idiot about something. "What?" There may have been petulance in his tone, not that he would ever admit to it.

"You need to get rid of that guy. You can't even see that he's a threat, can you?"

"What guy?" He asked, feigning nonchalance.

"Seriously?" Waving his hand to the monitors along the back wall, three of which were displaying security camera stills of the "Captain," Rhodes frowned.

“Come on, Rhodey. Lighten up. It’s just a little cat and mouse, you know the drill with these agents. It’s so much more fun to toy with them.”

“But then you take them out of the picture when they get too cocky.”

“Where’s the fun in that? If I can’t have a witty repartee with someone, what’s the point in this whole villain scheme?”

“The point is to have people give you a healthy dose of respect, partially out of fear. They won’t respect you if they think you’re going goo-goo eyes over some blond.”

“I’m not going ‘goo-goo eyes’ over anyone!” Tony snarled back, starting to get irritated with the very suggestion that he was beginning to lose control over his followers. He couldn’t risk that. There were certain things he needed in order to keep his identity away from SHIELD, to keep enough evidence to the contrary that they could never pin Iron Man’s actions on one Tony Stark. He didn’t take note of the heavy silence between them until Rhodes cleared his throat again, an apologetic grimace on his face.

“If you want those guys to stop talking behind your back, you need to take him out of the picture.”

Tony turned back to his abandoned welding torch, fiddling with the valves for a moment before pulling the mask back down over his features, shuttering them. “Fine,” he answered, voice muffled. “I’ll take care of it.”

+++

The café was nearly empty when Steve arrived, shoulders hunched as he ordered his drink and took up a small table near the window. He rolled the afternoon’s conversation—a series of meetings, really—around in his mind. There had been several incidents involving Iron Man in the previous weeks, and although Steve’s team had failed to bring the man into custody, they were getting closer with each encounter.

Apparently, the reassurances that they *would* get him, soon, were not sufficient enough for Fury.

He had expected the talking-to, the expectation that he would need to bring Iron Man in on the next encounter or risk being taken off the case entirely. What Steve hadn’t expected was for Natasha to be in the room during the discussion only to remain perfectly, stoically, silent.

Steve couldn’t recall a time when he was so furious with someone he considered a friend. He’d left HQ without waiting to confront her about it, lines of tension and anger echoing through his shoulders. It had only taken a few minutes for him to clear the building, and by then, Sharon was calling his cell phone.

Which was how he wound up at the small coffee shop around the street corner from his apartment, glowering down at a dark mug of coffee as though it held the solution to his problems. He was so focused on the next step, on trying to predict what Stark might try next and how they could actually take him in, that he barely noticed another occupant at his table until a lithe hand was waving before his face, nails painted a pastel pink.

“Hello, earth to Steve? You in there, sugar?”

He shifted his gaze from his coffee and forced a smile onto his lips. “Hey, Sharon.”

“Oh no. You look like someone wrung you out to dry.” She pushed a curl of blonde hair behind her ear as she pressed the edge of a plate closer to him. There were three of the oatmeal chocolate chip cookies from the display case up front on it. “Cookie for your thoughts?”

Steve chuckled and shook his head before snagging one of the treats. “It’s not a big deal. I’m just feeling a lot of pressure from the higher ups, you know?”

With a nod, Sharon broke off the edge of one of the remaining cookies, popping it into her mouth and swallowing before she spoke. “Sure. But this looks more like you’re mad about something else, not just about Fury having his laser-eye on.”

“Maybe,” Steve snorted, letting a more natural smile cross his features as he gestured with his hands. “I just don’t see why it’s such a big deal that we nail this guy. I mean…he’s not doing any real harm?”

“He spray painted the mayor’s entire property red and gold.”

“That’s not so—”

“*Including* his prize-winning begonias.”

He had to stop himself from chuckling. “Yeah, but that’s… I mean it’s property damage, vandalism at best. It’s not like he’s actually *hurting people*.”

“Not any more,” Sharon reminded him gently, her voice quiet. “Look, Steve. They don’t ask for my opinion on these things, but I’m going to give it to you like I see it. It’s only a matter of time before Iron Man goes back to how he was before, with all the destruction and chaos. People **died**, Steve. He killed them. Don’t forget that.”

Steve’s hand tightened around the ceramic mug and he had to remind himself to remain calm before he broke it. Delicate fingers covered his tense knuckles, the edge of a pale thumbnail brushing against the back of his hand. “I just want you to be careful. I know they’re putting a lot of pressure on you to get this guy but…just remember to keep yourself safe first. To me, it kind of looks like he’s baiting you with all these little stunts.”

He frowned. “Baiting me?”

“Yeah. Trying to lure you out over and over, run you down and give you a false sense of security.” She glanced to the street outside the window, a bustling crowd of teenagers jostling each other precariously close to the glass. After a beat, they passed, and she took a sip of her tea. “Just promise me you’ll be careful, all right?”

“Sharon,” Steve sighed, shaking his head and feeling plenty of the tension flee from his shoulders and chest. He turned his hand that was clutching the mug, giving hers a quick, reassuring squeeze. “I’ll be careful. Promise.”

+++

Tony wasn’t quite sure why they were having a business meeting at some hole-in-the-wall restaurant in *Brooklyn* of all places, but he’d learned not to argue when Pepper told him where to be and at what time. He’d even managed to get the oil out from beneath his fingernails. Mostly.

“The guy’s late. Can’t we just call it a no-show and be on our way?” He was already fidgeting, eager to get back to the latest project, knowing JARVIS would be done running the calculations in only another couple of hours.

“No,” she answered simply, sipping at her drink, twisting the olives around the bottom of the glass. “We wait for you all the time.”

“Ouch, Pep. Really. Right in the heart.” Pepper glanced at him with a chiding look and all he could do in response was resist the overwhelming urge to pout. “Fine. Twenty minutes.”

“Deal.”

Twenty minutes was an exorbitantly long time when the only other occupant of the table was upset with you. Tony knew he’d pushed back too hard that morning, nearly refusing outright to go to the very meeting he was currently waiting on. There was only so far he could strain things between them before Pepper was really, truly upset with him.

She was on her second martini. Suffice to say, she was fairly pissed.

So Tony kept himself busy alternating between people-watching out the window and running through calculations on his phone. The efficiency wasn’t there without being able to speak aloud, and since he didn’t think Pepper would appreciate him visibly working at the table, he spent more time watching the loud group of teens on the opposite end of the street. The noise carried all the way across the busy roadway and Tony watched as one of the boys shoved another into the glass window of a café, causing several patrons to look up with wide eyes. The teen who had been pressed against the glass was shoving back at his friend now, face flushed with a sprawl of embarrassment. Tony was so focused on their antics for a moment he almost didn’t notice the handsome blond seated at the table nearest the window. The blond that looked an awful lot like…

Oh.

Oh *shit*.

He shifted in his seat, turning to get a better look, but even from across the street he could see the hard lines of broad shoulders and a perfectly chiseled jawline. There was no question—either that man was an impeccable look-alike, or the Captain was seated just a scant half block away. To be sure, just to verify his assumptions really, Tony pulled his cell out again and tapped in a quick command before returning his gaze to the man across the street.

The phone rang for several beats before the man across the street moved to retrieve his own. Tony was just noticing how his hand had been tangled with the woman’s across from him, how he flashed her an apologetic look before answering the call. He had frowned first at the tiny screen, probably seeing the blocked caller ID, but he still picked up. Tony could faintly hear his voice through the line and he lifted his own phone to his ear, just listening to the quiet “Hello? Hello?” through the line.

He also managed to hear the woman, her voice barely a murmur as she asked, “Steve? Who is it?”

Steve.

Tony disconnected the call in a hurry, pressing his phone back into his pocket and glancing across the street to watch the blond man give his head a confused little shake. He was so focused on the

conversation in the café, he hadn't noticed Pepper speaking until she nudged his shin under the table with the pointed toe of her stiletto.

"Tony. The rep is here. Just saw his car round the corner. Are you alright?"

"Huh?" He turned back to face her, took in the way her brow was furrowed and the tight lines around her mouth. With a soft smile, he reached across the table to give her fingers a squeeze where they were twisted around the stem of her glass. "Sorry. I'm fine. Just had a small detail to verify, that's all. Now…what is this guy going to pitch us?"

She visibly relaxed and smiled at him before launching into a brief pitch that he really should have been paying more attention to. But all Tony could think about was the way the Captain had been watching that woman, his hand curled tenderly about hers. It was almost like it was…a date.

No, that couldn't be right. The Captain was far too busy for such things, too fond of order and routine to put up with the kind of nonsense that came from casual dating. But that *looked* like a date, and for all intents and purposes the Captain had *looked* happy. And the woman had called him *Steve*.

Tony cursed and tried to keep his mind on topic, he really did, as Pepper and the representative from the company Tony couldn't recall the name of tried to hash out the details of a deal. He was almost certain he was responding at appropriate times, adding quips when need be, but Pepper was frowning at him by the time the meeting was over and he still couldn't bring himself out of his mind enough to murmur more than a half-hearted apology.

He really did need to get the Captain out of the picture. If only to prove he wasn't obsessed. There were a series of steps he would need to take, things he needed to organize, but his mind was already whirring with potential outcomes and results. It was time for a new plan of action.

Making an appearance at one of New York's finest fundraisers of the year wasn't really an issue—after all, he'd had the invitation pending in his calendar for months—but attending without rousing Pepper's suspicions was another matter entirely.

"There are some benefactors that I really should be shaking hands with, doing the whole 'making connections' thing you're always bothering me about," Tony insisted, holding an array of red and gold ties up against his suit jacket, snapping his tongue against the back of his teeth with each incorrect choice.

Pepper snagged the ties from his hands and offered a deep crimson instead. It looked stunning with the charcoal gray, of course. "I only wish you had told me earlier. I would have re-arranged my schedule."

The last thing Tony needed was Pepper frowning unhappily at him across the table while he plotted on various ways to sneak a toxin into the good Captain's drink. He flapped his hand about as he settled himself into the suit jacket. "No, no. It's fine. I'm sure it's going to be an absolute bore and I wouldn't want you to miss out on your lovely meeting with Senator Clark in Miami tomorrow morning."

"You and I both know he's just going to try and talk SI into starting an open-ended weapons contract. Again. As if turning him down six times in the past wasn't enough," she chided, moving

to mend the knot in his tie.

He made a soft non-committal noise while her deft fingers worked through the silk, her palm pressing gently to his chest for only a moment before she offered him a tight smile. “It’ll be fine, Pep. I promise not to make a complete ass of myself, unless I get stuck talking with Winnie Golding. God, you’d think she never needs to breathe with the way she carries on.”

The too-tight smile was replaced with something a bit softer and a quick nod. “I know. Okay, I really do need to be off. I’ll be back before you know it.” The sound of her heels carried down the length of the hallway. Tony listened until the very last sound dissipated before switching his plain platinum cufflinks for something a bit more… *practical*.

By the time Tony arrived, the party was in full swing; all the better to slip about unnoticed. His mask was a pale amber color with a bright ruby inlay, something Pepper claimed would compliment his skin tone. The room was bustling, filled with bodies decked out in all their finery, showcasing the level of their wealth in the intricacies of their jewels. Tony thought they looked like a cluster of puffed-up peacocks, but, should things go according to plan, he wouldn’t have to stay much longer than a few hours. He didn’t immediately see the Captain, or any of SHIELD’s other operatives, though he was sure they had to be lurking somewhere in the crowd.

After a few moments of scanning the ballroom, being stopped not once but **twice** by members of the charity’s board of directors, Tony wrangled a position at the bar where he could keep an eye on the main entrance to the room. He was just beginning to think that the intel JARVIS had hacked from the servers at SHIELD was bogus when he saw a trio of suits enter, two men and a woman. He didn’t recognize the man on the left, slight in frame but with posture so straight Tony was sure his spine was fused together. The woman, however, sent his blood running chilled through his veins. Her hair was a sunny auburn tonight and most of her face was covered by the delicate feathered mask, but he would recognize her lithe form anywhere. He’d only had one run-in with Agent Romanoff, but he had hoped it would be the last.

Apparently not.

Just his luck, the two agents were flanking none-other than the good Captain himself, wearing a soft-looking tux that had to be something off-the-rack. God forbid he should dress in something that actually *fit* for once. After quickly tossing back the last of his drink, Tony made his way to a less-crowded area of the room, watching the small cluster of spies spread out and “mingle.” He quickly lost sight of Romanoff and the other goon, but the Captain got side-tracked speaking to an elderly woman who had all-but-sunk her cherry red nails into the meat of his arm. Swiping a glass of champagne from a passing waiter’s tray, Tony squared his shoulders and drifted across the room with intent, sidling around groups of people chattering about every inane topic under the sun: the weather, their god-son’s birthday party, a new line of heavily inferior battery packs that Hammer Tech was releasing next week.

As soon as he had that broad frame in sight, Tony slowed, just enough to plan his next few steps carefully. He could see the young woman, who, having imbibed too much liquor too early in the night, was darting across the open space just behind where the Captain was speaking to the old bat. With a few quick steps he was bumped, just at his heels, and it was enough to send both himself and the glass of champagne directly into the solid lines of Agent Rogers’ back. The blond immediately swiveled in place, letting the cougar fend for herself as he grasped at Tony’s elbow, crease of concern between his brows. “Gosh, are you all right?”

No immediate sign of recognition. Score one for Tony. He pitched his voice lower, kept his body language softer. It wouldn't do to let up his guise.

"Oh, yes. Sorry. I'm afraid I wasn't watching where I was going and… I'm afraid I've gone and ruined your jacket." Thank god. It was a travesty to fashion.

The man straightened and made to remove his jacket, probably to examine the damage, but Tony was faster, laying a quick hand on the edge of his sleeve. "Let's see if we can't get the champagne out before it sets. There's a washroom nearby, I think." Tony jerked his head in the direction and watched as the super-spy let his eyes flicker over the crowd before offering a quick nod in return.

There was no one else in the small space, which should make this a whole lot easier. Tony could feel the little vial in his jacket pocket, knew the cufflinks could inflict a certain level of damage on their own should the need arise. But as he looked up from locking the outermost door, his breath stuttered and stalled somewhere in the vicinity of his throat.

The Captain had removed his jacket, examining the situation under the poor lighting provided by the dim lamps mounted over the sinks. His white dress shirt strained against shoulders too large for the confines and Tony could make out the curve of muscle beneath. Shit, shit, *shit*.

Well, time for plan B.

+++

It didn't look stained, which was good. He was lucky it had been champagne and not one of those syrupy-sweet pink things he'd seen some of the girls wandering around with. A quick rinse should do just fine.

Steve let out a quiet sigh. It was just as well that he'd been pulled off the main scene by a small incident; the crowds were making him nervous, too many people wearing masks just as false as their personalities. He knew Natasha and Coulson were on a mission, here to complete a job, but he couldn't help but wonder why he'd been sent along with them. Surely they could have gathered just as much information without him, possibly more if they didn't have to keep tabs on his position as well. He'd given Natasha a nod from across the room, where she'd been talking with someone of obvious status, before leaving his post to deal with the spill.

He'd nearly forgotten he wasn't alone.

"Oh good. I was worried I'd ruined it." The man was close when he spoke, his palm pressed against Steve's shoulder, the heat of contact seeping through the dress shirt and undershirt beneath. Steve was fairly certain he could make out the sweep of each dark lash.

"Seems to be fine. It'll just need a moment to dry out, I suppose." Lifting the jacket and examining the still-damp patch he'd created when daubing out the champagne, he figured it would take fifteen minutes, tops. "Fifteen minutes or so," Steve verbalized, just to be sure the message would be relayed to the rest of his team, via their communicators.

"I'll keep you company. Seems only fair since I did the damage."

"Suit yourself. Though I'm sure the party out there is more entertaining than watching a suit coat dry."

The stranger laughed, eyes sparkling with mirth and something that sent a flush sprawling across the back of Steve's neck. "You obviously don't value your own company, sir."

"'Fraid I'm not much company, most of the time." Steve didn't want to give too much away, they hadn't come up with intricate back stories for this mission, not like they had in the past, and he was at a loss with how much he was to tell someone given the situation. "Not much of a talker."

A dark gaze swept up and down the length of his body and Steve could feel the curl of heat in his gut. Sure, he'd gotten that look before, but he'd never really been all that interested. Yet here he was, in some ritzy bathroom with his damp jacket in hand getting the damn butterflies from a single look.

"Well, not sure if anyone's told you, but you're quite the looker. Talking doesn't matter so much, after that." The man took a step closer, his voice smooth and sultry, twisting Steve's chest in nervous knots.

"Um."

Smooth, Rogers. Real smooth.

The stranger was close enough now for Steve to feel the heat between them, barely an inch separating their bodies. Steve was backed up against the bathroom sink; he was sure the backs of his trousers were probably getting damp now too, but he couldn't find it in himself to care. A hand was sliding along his jawline, his own unsure and gripping tight to the edge of the sink. There was a delicate brush against the fine hairs behind his ear and then a pinprick, quick as anything, before the world tilted sideways and went dark.

+++

Rhodes stormed into the workshop, his boots a heavy and uneven staccato on the pavement. Yeah, he was probably kind of pissed.

"Tones. This really, **really** isn't what I meant when I said you needed to take him out of the picture."

"What? The picture is the public eye, right? He's out! Gone, vanished, disappeared."

Tony watched as Rhodey pressed a palm to his face, an exhausted groan slipping past his lips. "I didn't mean *bring him back to home base*. ***Alive*** of all things. If he gets out he'll know exactly where we are and what we're up to next. You don't exactly clean up your half-finished projects down there." He made a frustrated gesture to the metal slab in the center of the room where the blond agent lay unconscious, still dressed in a formal suit and tie, which he had been wearing when Tony snagged him from an unrelated mission that evening.

Lifting one shoulder in a half-shrug, Tony waved a hand through the air flippantly. "Come on, it's not that big of a deal. Did you miss the giant death laser?" He asked, pointing to said device hovering only a few feet above the Captain's chest. "I've got it covered."

"Why bother keeping him alive, then?"

"So I can have my villainous monologue, obviously. Jeeze, Rhodey, did you forget how these things are done?"

“I must have,” he answered with an exaggerated roll of his eyes. “Seriously, though. This is not going to fly with the rest of the guys.”

“Then they can be the ones to peel laser-fried SHIELD agent off my workshop floors.” Tony growled, narrowing his gaze. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, Pepper and I have a dinner date. And I’m late.”

“Of course, *boss*.”

Tony could hear it in Rhodey’s voice, the unhappy hints of disapproval, but he chose to ignore them. After all, this was his plan. It would work. His plans always worked.

+++

When Steve woke, the first thing he noticed was that it was cold.

The second was that his head was killing him.

And the third was that he had no idea where in the hell he was.

Great.

He was in a warehouse of some sort, that much he could see when he twisted his head around, taking note of the architecture and his surroundings, making an attempt to find any visible exits. As far as he could see, there were none—no windows or doors, not even so much as a grate anywhere within his direct line of sight. His tuxedo was still intact, minus the jacket, down to the inactive transmitter in his left cufflink. True, he could activate it at any moment, but until he knew what kind of situation he’d found himself in, Steve would rather leave out the reinforcements.

Of course, the giant contraption aimed directly at his breastbone wasn’t exactly reassuring. He wondered idly if it were activated by a pressure change against the table, or if it needed a manual override to activate at all. If that were the case, there didn’t appear to be anyone around to *give* said override, so maybe now would be a good time to test the restraints.

Okay, yes, those were solid steel. He wasn’t going anywhere for a while.

Instead, he thought back to the last thing he remembered—the masquerade ball for a new art gallery, an event that SHIELD had been watching for some time, their intel leading them to believe there might be trouble behind the scenes. After all, it was easier to get up to something when everyone was wearing masks. They’d sent Steve with Natasha and Coulson, but the three agents had parted ways early in the night to cover more ground. Had it been a set-up? Were they taken too? And if so, where were they?

Steve shook his head a little, giving the restraints around his wrists another tug. He was debating the likelihood of there being anything useful in his pockets, given the situation, when he heard humming. It started off quietly enough, melodious though a little pitchy, but soon a voice was singing along to the unfamiliar tune.

He turned to face the sound.

+++

The plan wasn’t working.

Sure, he'd worked out everything he was going to say, about how he planned to completely dismantle SHIELD's entire system from the inside out, how he was going to kill the Captain to send them a great big message, how he would take this city and make it his own without anyone even knowing.

He hadn't expected those big blue eyes to be watching him, awake and alert, the second he shimmied into the workshop. Thankfully, he had made sure that the Captain wouldn't have a clear line of sight to the secondary entrance, the door that led to the main workshop concealed behind a row of concrete supports that stretched all the way to the roof. Still, it took him a moment to get his bearings, clearing his throat as he approached the man on the slab. He'd left his mask behind, feeling it was only fair, as he'd de-masked the spy the moment he had him in restraints. Just to be sure.

And was he ever sure.

"I really don't know why you bother with the mask," Tony chimed, lifting the bit of black polymer, twisting it within his hands. Cheap construction, though sturdy enough for its function, he supposed. "Anyone with eyes can see that it's you."

There was a grunt as the man bristled, shifting his weight against the restraints. "What's the meaning of this, Iron Man?"

"Back to that, are we?" He asked with a click of his tongue. "Come on now, really, I think we know each other much better than that, don't we," Tony paused, letting the moment linger, " *Steve* ?"

He suppressed the urge to cackle when he saw how quickly that made the Captain freeze, eyes wide and filled with the swiftest flash of panic. It was gone, just as soon, but Tony kept grinning. "You think I wouldn't be able to figure that out? Honestly, what kind of a villain do you take me for?"

Silence was his answer, and though he had hoped for more of a repartee with the Captain, he supposed the man was still in shock. After all, his 'secret' identity hadn't been much of a secret, had it? Tony moved to fiddle with the dials on the side of the ray, hovering precariously above the agent's chest. True, everything external on the device was just for show—but it didn't hurt to make the man squirm.

"What's the point of bringing me here? If you're going to kill me just do it."

Tony glanced back to be sure he heard correctly, the Captain's voice had been so hard and determined, but those blue eyes were looking away from him, his head turned as much as it could on the table. "Please. Where's the fun in that?"

"Fun?" Came the snarled reply, furious gaze locking with his own. It sent a shudder straight through Tony, curling low at the base of his spine. "You think that this is *fun*?"

"Oh no, you misunderstand," he chided, smirk falling back into place as he stepped through the stone columns, toward the exit. "The fun is just beginning, Captain. Pleasant dreams."

As he left the room, an angered shout of 'STARK!' echoed out behind him. Tony couldn't help but think this was a very, very good idea.

+++

The room was chilly, not unbearably so, but infinitely quieter than any place Steve had been held before. He supposed the lack of sound was a torture technique all in itself. There were no windows, no visible doors, and no way for him to tell how much time had passed, though it couldn't have been more than a few hours since Stark had left.

Stark. He still couldn't believe that the man would be so brash, so completely ignorant as to capture an agent alive. Steve didn't know what the villain was thinking, or if he even *was* thinking when he pulled this stunt. He pressed his thumb against the tracker in his sleeve, just feeling it out, seeing if it was still there. Why Stark wouldn't have removed it was beyond him, though perhaps it had been overlooked? Was Iron Man really getting that sloppy?

Steve was just debating whether he should activate the small device, it had to have been at least a day since he'd been taken captive, when he heard the whirr of machinery coming to life. His gaze immediately tracked to the weapon poised above him, but it remained inert. Instead, the sound was coming somewhere just outside of his line of sight, to the left of the room. He craned his neck to peer in the direction of the noise, a metal claw swinging into view, tilting left and right in front of his face. It took a few moments for Steve to realize it was *waving* at him.

"Uh…hello?" He offered, brow raised curiously.

The robot rolled closer, enough that he could make out the stenciled "DUM-E" on its side. Steve frowned, watching as it moved about the table, tapping at the edges with its claw. He cleared his throat, noting that the bot stopped when he did so. "Say…could you get me out of here?"

For a moment, the claw tilted to one side. Steve chuckled, the reaction frighteningly similar to when one mentions 'treats' to a dog. A process seemed to complete as the robot took off across the concrete floor once again, Steve straining to hear where it was going, listening for the gentle whirr of motors. Eventually, he gave up trying to follow the motions—the bot seemed to be pacing, perhaps to throw him off. Then again, it could just be stuck in a loop.

With a sigh, Steve closed his eyes. He may as well settle in for the long haul, since it didn't seem like Stark was coming back any time soon. Though it hadn't been more than a few minutes, he felt a tap at his elbow, motors whirring in a symphony of pitches. When he opened his eyes, peering to his side, he was surprised to find the machine wiggling an orange ball near the general vicinity of his hand.

Apparently, it wanted to play.

Steve couldn't help but chuckle, watching the thing rocket across the open space, retrieving the ball and bringing it back only to have it tossed again. Though he couldn't throw it far while in the restraints, he found the task amusing, keeping his mind from running in circles about Stark's motives.

They kept at it for an hour, the back and forth pressure starting to wear on his wrist where it was pressed up tight against the steel cuffs. Steve licked at his lips, his throat dry. The room was climate controlled for machinery, not people, and he was thinking that if anything was going to be the end of him in this place, it would be dehydration. He rolled his head on the slab, looking to the bot as it nudged the ball across the floor.

"Hey, you think you could maybe get me some water?" Steve didn't know if the request would get him anywhere, but he figured it was at least worth a try. There seemed to be some recognition, at least, as the robot took off again, disappearing from sight.

This time, it took longer for the machine to return—Steve had started to nod off while he waited. He hadn't slept since the chemically-induced slumber hours before and it was beginning to wear on him, limbs feeling heavy and thick beneath the restraints. He jolted a bit when he felt the cool metal at his temple, but it was just the bot, pressing something near his face. There was a bottle of vitamin water, straw angled toward Steve's jaw. Raising his brows, he stretched as much as he was able to get his lips around the straw. It was all he could do not to drink the whole bottle, but since he wasn't sure when Stark was getting back, he figured it was safer not to fill his bladder.

"Thanks, buddy," he said when he had finished, the bot letting off a little chirrup of sound before wheeling away. Steve sighed and closed his eyes again, planning to at least try and sleep, when there was a tap at the edge of the metal table and two of the limbed creatures were now 'looking' at him. "Oh, you have a friend?"

The one labelled DUM-E let out a high-pitched whirr, pressing the ball at Steve's hand. With a slight shake of his head, he tossed it again, watching both bots peel after the rubber sphere, racing to grasp at it first with clumsy clawed appendages.

+++

This was a very, very bad idea.

Tony hadn't counted on how distracted he would be, just knowing he had a live hostage tucked away beneath his home. SHIELD hadn't come for him yet, which either meant their tech *was* as horribly outdated as Tony had expected (and couldn't break through his scramblers) or that the Captain hadn't called for them yet. The second option seemed highly unlikely, though not impossible—the man was stubborn as all hell.

Two could play at that game, and Tony was very good at being stubborn.

As though she felt his thoughts scattering among his other projects, Pepper cleared her throat and stared pointedly at his end of the table prior to addressing the board. "We at Stark Industries feel that the weapons industry just doesn't have the same global appeal as it once had. Our products, while efficient and effective, have time and again been found on the wrong side of a conflict. As such, we are encouraging our remaining contracts to keep a tight seal on their purchases and will no longer be accepting any new weapons contracts."

The room was silent for a beat before erupting into a sea of questions, people shouting over one another to be heard.

"What's the meaning of this?"

"How are we supposed to handle the distributors?"

"What the fuck are you thinking, Stark?!"

Despite the fact that Pepper had been the one to break the news, and was the current CEO of SI, everyone had rounded on Tony as though he held all the answers. With a sigh, he held up a hand, palm flat and directed outward, requesting silence. Eventually, they quieted to a murmur, and he stood from his chair, placing his palms on the tabletop.

"I understand that this comes as a shock to many of you," Tony started, keeping his voice level no matter how much he wanted to raise it. "But anyone watching the numbers can see we aren't

making what we used to in the weapons business. It's a product that is becoming more expensive to manufacture, not less, and that's not accounting for the atrocities which our weapons have been responsible for."

With a wave of his hand, Pepper dimmed the lights and brought up the images he had prepared. He didn't look to them, didn't have to—they were already burned into his memory. The first time he had seen them, thrust into his face at a gala, he had wanted to be sick. "*This*, gentlemen, is why we will no longer be manufacturing weaponry."

The room fell silent again, whispered tones breaking the quiet only after Pepper had cleared away the images from the screen. Tony nodded at her, a small smile pulling at the corner of his lips as he prepared himself for the second half of the announcement. He knew, no matter what happened here, at least Pepper would have his back.

"Now, with that out of the way, I would like to announce the new direction of Stark Industries." Tony paused, taking a moment to breathe, to settle the erratic rhythm of his heartbeat. "We will be pursuing the energy sector, with a new technology that is sure to keep us at the top of our game. There will be a press conference later in the week to announce this new direction, and though I don't expect everyone to be on board with this," he glanced around the table, hearing the mumbled stream of remarks already bubbling past the board's lips, "I do plan to see a substantial increase in our profit margin by the third quarter.

"Should you have any further questions, please direct them to Ms. Potts. After all, she *is* the acting CEO." Tony lifted his palms from the table, sliding his sunglasses back into place before nodding to the room at large. "Gentlemen."

There was an eruption of noise, the board clamoring for his attention as he left the room, but Tony didn't pay them any mind. He was expected at another press conference across town within the hour, a meeting with the secretary general in the afternoon, and dinner with Pepper at precisely seven thirty.

Despite his schedule, the thousands of directions his attention was drawn to, his mind wandered back to his workshop, where a certain someone should be calling for backup any time now.

By the time he sidled into Il Mulino, making a beeline for their reserved table at the back, Tony was about ready to collapse. After the disaster with the board that morning, he'd been sidelined by an off-the-cuff remark at the press conference, and *that* had thrown him off going into his meeting with the secretary general. Needless to say, nothing had progressed as smoothly as intended.

And it had been seventeen and a half hours since he last checked in on the Captain.

Pepper arrived late, which was unusual for her, and had him worried that something else had come up after he left the board meeting. He didn't get a chance to bring it up, however, her eyes shrewd and alert as she glanced over the tense lines of his posture. She ordered herself a martini, dry and dirty, before she steepled her fingers and glanced at him across the table. "That was some stunt you pulled."

"Had to be done," Tony answered with a shrug, taking a slow sip from his own drink to avoid speaking about it for a moment. "They settle down after I left?"

"You make it sound like I'm running a daycare."

“You’re not?” He offered, brow raised and a smile crossing over his lips as he watched her chuckle and shake her head.

“I’m *supposed* to be running your billion dollar company, but yes, some days it does feel an awful lot like a daycare,” she teased, lips flicking upward a gentle fraction before settling into a thin line. “But something is bothering you. And it’s not the board. What happened with the secretary general?”

Tony waved her off, holding his now-empty glass up to garner the attention of their waiter. “Nothing. Well, nothing unexpected, anyway. They’re pleased with the new direction, though I suppose the UN thinks they’re going to be able to worm their way into SI’s remaining contracts. They want to track all of our current deals, to be sure we are keeping up with what we said we would.”

There was a furrow, that little wrinkle of lines in the center of her forehead that he longed to smooth his thumb across, to calm. Tony kept his hands on his glass. “What is it, then?”

“Sorry?” He asked, glancing up from the tablecloth to see Pepper frowning at him.

“Something is bothering you. Tony, please. I think I know you well enough to understand when you’re hiding something,” she whispered, a gentle smile on her lips as her hand reached for his, slender digits brushing across the edge of his palm.

He felt guilty, feeling the delicate sweep of her fingers, which used to calm him, to settle his mind. Now, however, Tony felt nothing, just a gnawing reluctance to speak. “Pepper…” he started, glancing about the restaurant. “Maybe now isn’t…the best time. Or place.”

There was a quick flash of realization in her eyes, she had always been sharp, and she drew her hand back with a snap. Her fingers curled around the stem of her martini glass. Tony could see them trembling. “Of course, Tony.”

He felt like an asshole.

+++

Eventually, Steve felt worn enough that he had to shoo the bots away, a series of disappointed trills following the motion. Honestly, they were insatiable, and he had no doubt that he would be playing a barely passable version of ‘fetch’ until his arm fell off, should they have their way. He nodded off for a few hours, no longer able to keep his eyes open or his senses alert.

Steve woke with a start to the sound of an alarm rolling through the workshop. However, ‘alarm’ may have been a harsh word for it, since the sound was barely louder than the buzz of the machinery. He shifted his head, trying to track the location of the noise when a quiet voice chimed in. “I will have to request you put that down, DUM-E, lest I alert sir of your intentions.”

Someone else was in the room, and it sent a coursing rush of unease through Steve’s body. “...hello?” He offered to the near-silence, awaiting a response. When none came, he frowned, brow furrowed. Had he imagined it?

Another series of sounds echoed through the room before DUM-E came wheeling back to the table, something small clutched within its claw. The robot got close enough to drop it onto the edge of the

metal slab before reeling off again, its task supposedly complete. Steve frowned, twisting his head to get a better look at what had been left behind. A key?

Carefully, he stretched his hand toward the key, fingertips barely brushing against the edge. Steve strained against the cuffs, just managing to slide the flat metal close enough to grab. He clutched it in his fist, feeling the hard edges digging into the meat of his palm. What could it be a key for? There didn't seem to be anything near him that required a physical key, and he was sure that the locking mechanism for his cuffs were controlled remotely. As he was pondering the use of a key without a lock, the soft British voice returned.

"My apologies, Captain. I believe DUM-E has given you something that should not have been removed from its station. If you would kindly return said item to DUM-E, he will restore it to its proper location."

"Who are you?" Steve asked, diverting the query from the key still held tight in his hand.

There was a pause, brief but noticeable, before the voice responded, "I run the workshop for sir, that is all you need to know, Captain. Now, I must ask that you relinquish the item which has been ill-advisedly given to you."

Steve held tight to the key, weighing his options. Yes, it could be completely useless, but if this *voice* wanted it returned so badly to its proper place, it must hold some sort of importance. "Where is Stark? Why am I being held here?"

"Sir is currently predisposed elsewhere," the voice replied, silence following the brief interlude. Within moments, DUM-E was back at Steve's side, nudging at his hand with a claw clasped tight around the orange rubber ball.

Heaving a falsely-chagrined sigh, Steve tucked the key away into the cuff of his shirtsleeve, right alongside the tracker. Just in case.

"All right, give it here."

DUM-E wheeled across the cement before Steve even had a proper grip on the ball, U peeking out from behind a bay of machines. The mystery voice didn't make another appearance. Steve wasn't sure what to make of that.

+++

"What the hell is going on here?"

Tony frowned at DUM-E, the bot clutching at a bouncy rubber ball at the end of its claw which was drooped downward as though it were upset with the scolding. U had already vanished, likely hiding somewhere to avoid the shame, but he had heard both sets of motors when he entered the lab. He was so focused on the pair of them he hadn't noticed that the Captain was watching him until he cleared his throat to speak. "Are you just going to keep me locked up here for all eternity? Is that really your dastardly plan?"

"No. The plan is to let you sit here and suffer until I tire of you. Then you get to find out what the laser feels like," Tony snarled back, pointing to the device still hanging above the blond, completely harmless for the time being. He had an extremely long day and the twenty three hours it took to get back down here had him on edge.

The break-up after a nice dinner didn't didn't exactly help either.

Tony paced to the far side of the room, lifting a small remote and flicking the switch on the side. The laser now buzzed to life, drawing the Captain's attention almost immediately. Tony couldn't help a little swell of pride to see the flash of fear that flickered through blue eyes. "Ah, now you're paying attention," he chided, shaking his head as he side-stepped over, humming under his breath.

"*And I get a little bit Genghis Khan*."

"What?" The Captain was watching him, though part of his attention was still directed to the red-hot glow at the point of the machine.

"Nothing, dear. Don't worry about it." Tony glowered at the small box in his hands. In hindsight, it may have been a bit much to make it quite as simple as it was, just two large buttons to decide a man's fate. He glanced to his captive, eyes drawn to the stubborn set of his jaw and the unwavering

gaze of those bright, *bright* eyes. Swallowing around the lump in his throat, he let his finger hover over the lower button, a bright red splotch in his vision.

“Sir?”

JARVIS’s voice snapped Tony out of his internal debate, and he turned his head to the display he had been ignoring previously, seeing the numbers scrawl across the screen. He frowned. “Right now, J?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Right,” he hissed, moving away from the Captain and depositing the remote on a far table. “So sorry to cut and run, Captain. I’ll be back before you even have time to miss me.” Tony flicked the switch on the side, turning off the laser as he hurried to the hidden door at the back.

He was certain, as he left, he heard a shuddering sigh followed by the softest trill of notes.

“*Nobody else but me*…”

+++

Steve didn’t hit the tracker.

He knew, without a doubt, that now would be the ideal time to call for backup. There had been no indication that SHIELD would come on their own and it was clear that Stark really did intend to kill him, at the end of the day.

But he didn’t activate the device. Steve was hungry, and tired, and cold—but he didn’t set off the ping that would tell Natasha and Fury exactly where he was. He couldn’t help but think back on the song Stark had been singing and humming and shimmying along to for nearly every visit now. There was a reluctance there, and something…something Steve didn’t know how to pin down. He wasn’t sure if he *wanted* to pin it down, put a name to it. That would mean he would have to deal with the absurd affection bubbling beneath his own chest.

He’d made note of it, learned early on that there was something more than the desire to bring Stark to justice that was fueling his behavior. Natasha had brought it up first, relaying his previous actions back to him in a new light, showcasing exactly how enamored—her word, not his—with the case he had become. There was a deeper reasoning, curled low in his chest, to justify his actions with Stark.

The bots didn’t come back to him. He wasn’t sure if Stark had deactivated them or simply given them orders to stay away, but he was finding that the time passed much more slowly without their distraction. So he slept, and tested the restraints, and hummed a few bars, and slept again. He was halfway to waking when Stark returned, looking pale and drawn but singing quietly to himself as though trying not to wake Steve.

“*But you can’t be free, ‘cause I’m selfish I’m obscene*.” The words floated through the room, sending the raking edge of a shudder through Steve’s spine. He opened his eyes just enough to watch Stark retrieve the remote, powering on the laser. That brought his attention around almost immediately, eyes snapping to the subtle hum above him.

“Stark?” He tried, voice raspy and dry. How long had he been out?

"*Don't want you to get it on with nobody else but me*." Stark was singing now, loud enough to nearly drown out the sound of the device. He wouldn't look at Steve, no matter how hard Steve strained to see the man's eyes. Something was amiss. Stark's hand shook where it held the remote, his eyes never leaving the slick metal surface.

Steve felt his heart shudder to a stop at the press of a button.

+++

Stupid, stupid, ***stupid***.

Tony flung the remote to the far wall, letting it shatter to pieces as the laser powered down, the familiar hum tapering to silence. He felt sick, leaning against a workbench and letting his nails scrabble uselessly at the smooth surface. There was the hurried sound of footsteps, expensive loafers crossing the concrete flooring, moving in a swift line *away* .

The footsteps stopped. Tony supposed that the Captain had found the door to the main workshop, which he had instructed JARVIS to leave open. In fact, every door, right to the large double doors at the front of the house, were wide open. He could play nice, should he really want to.

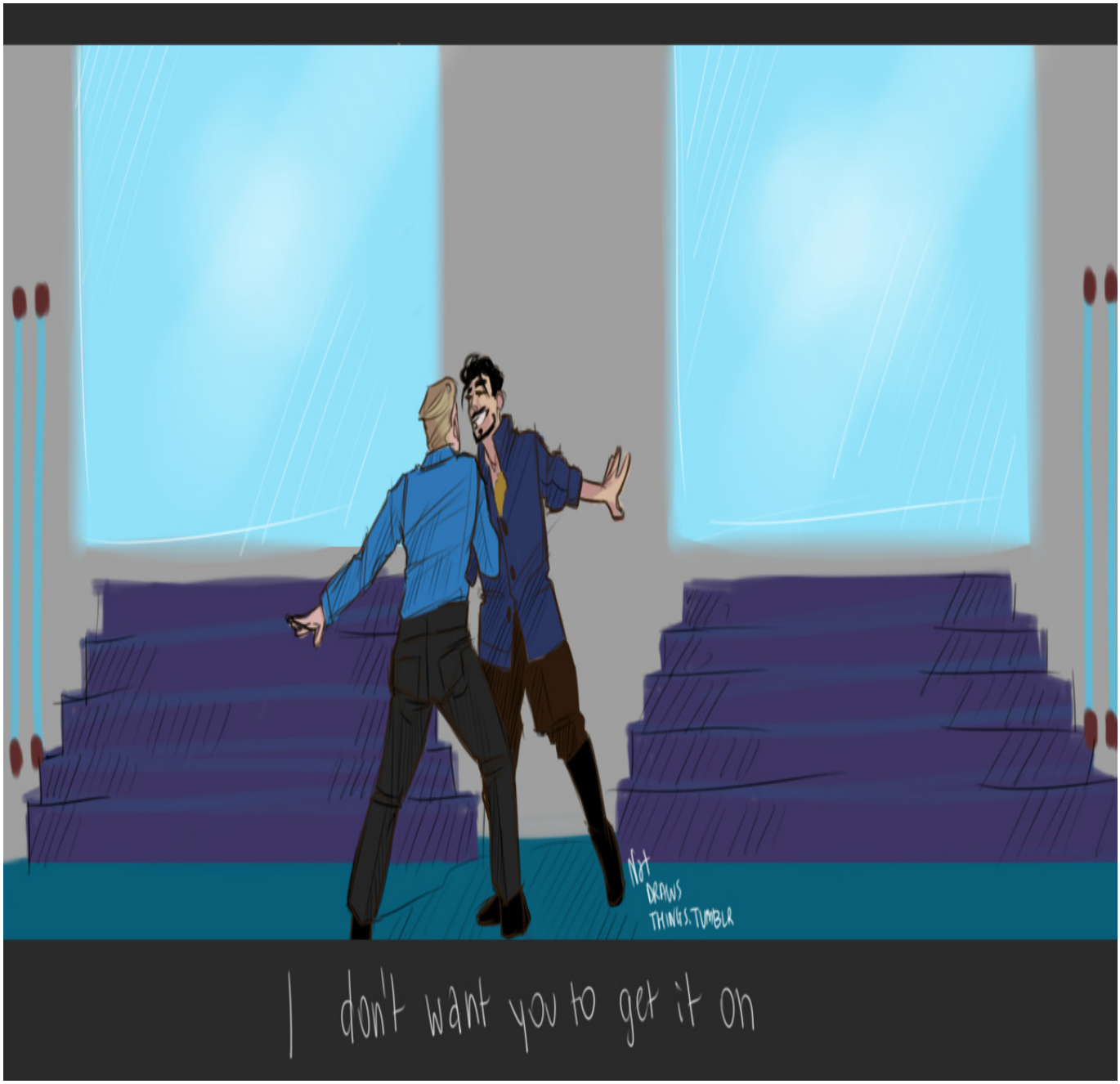
None of it mattered now. Steve was gone, probably hated him more than he had before, and Tony was too much of a coward to say a damn thing about how he felt. How he *really* felt. Pepper had hit the nail on the head—he would never have enough courage to go after what he wanted, what might actually make him happy.

Tony clutched at the edge of the bench, his shoulders shaking as he sucked in a steadying breath. His heart was stuttering, though that was due, in part, to the maintenance he had skipped, the alarm he had ignored. After all, he couldn't do it while Steve was in the workshop, taking up the same slab he normally used for the procedure. He needed him out; freeing him was the easiest way to get what he needed.

There was a sound, so soft at first he didn't hear it, but someone was *singing* . Tony froze, glancing over his shoulder to see Steve, still hovering at the top of the stairs, cheek pressed against the concrete barrier. "*Gotta make up my mind but I don't know myself… No, I don't know myself…* "

"Steve?" Tony hissed, ignoring the fact that his voice cracked part-way through the word. He licked his lips, suddenly dry, as he watched the man turn away from the support beam. The look in those bright eyes made Tony shudder down to his toes.

"*I get a little bit Genghis Khan*," the blond sang, voice still soft, a little raspy, as he danced his way down the steps, hand outstretched toward Tony in obvious invitation. "*Don't want you to get it on with nobody else but me*."



Something within him trembled, a part of himself that Tony was sure he had lost years ago, or at the very least buried beneath the golden plate in his chest. He felt the corner of his lip slanting upward, his features breaking out into a sly grin before he could help himself. "*With nobody else but me,*" he sang, moving to match the Captain's pace, to time his own steps with the other man's. He could feel his heart shuddering in sync with the tempo, the music filtering soft through the speakers courtesy of JARVIS. They moved as though they had performed this dance a hundred times, and in a way, Tony supposed they had.

Every moment felt like it was leading up to this, all the banter, all the back and forth outside of these walls crumbled away and produced a painstakingly fragile melody between them. Tony ended the dance with a slow swoop toward Steve, their faces so close he could see the sweat gathering on the blond's brow, feel the shaky wavering of Steve's breath against his cheeks. He wanted to close the small gap between them, to see if this really was what he thought or if it were all some

imaginative trap, but he didn't get the chance. The same moment alarms started blaring throughout the workshop, Tony felt his heartbeat shudder and skip in his chest, the edges of his vision blurring.

He recognized the feeling of the concrete rising to meet his knees.

+++

"Stark!"

Steve didn't know what was happening. One moment, though it seemed like something straight from a movie or a dream, they had been dancing so fluidly he could barely believe it. The next, Stark had collapsed before him, taking short, rapid breaths while he clutched at the plate in his chest. Everything spun from perfect to panic in such quick succession it made Steve's head spin.

He managed to keep the villain from face-planting into the hard floor, his hands still holding tightly to trim shoulder as he lowered himself to a kneeling position, trying to get a look at Stark's face. "Stark? Hey, are you with me in there?"

"I'll…be fine…" he hissed in a voice that was barely audible, far from fine.

"Sir, I believe you are in urgent need of—"

"I know!" Stark snapped, his eyes darting to the *ceiling* of all places and though Steve really wanted to know what was going on with the mystery voice, he had more important things to worry about. Like keeping the man in front of him conscious.

"What can I do?" Steve asked, leaving little room for argument or discussion.

The look Stark fixed him with was pained, but he motioned to the cold metal slab where Steve had been held captive with a flailing wave of his hand. "Get me up on that table. JARVIS will walk you through the rest if I…"

He didn't have to finish the sentence, Steve was already scooping him up and arranging him carefully against the solid steel. DUM-E had wheeled over when Steve was occupied, carrying a tray of items that looked more suitable for working on machinery than on a human being. With some effort, and Steve's guiding hand between Stark's shoulder blades, the brunette managed to sit up and began digging around the tray in earnest, his face growing paler with each passing second.

"Shit, shit, *shit*. Where is it?! J, seriously, where the hell—"

"Captain. I do believe we need that item you have been… *safe-keeping*."

Steve had never felt so utterly chastised by the voice of a person he couldn't even see. Stark was watching him now, eyes wide and so full of fear and unease that Steve glanced away as he pulled the small golden key from his cuff. "I didn't know what it was for, DUM-E brought it to me and…"

He hadn't expected the bark of laughter, followed shortly by a series of thick-sounding coughs. Steve pressed the key into Stark's hand as the man started speaking in a hushed voice. "Figures that you were able to get a hold of this," he mumbled, taking the key and managing, with shaking fingers and the aid of one of the smallest screwdrivers, to open a hidden panel on the golden plating in his chest. Steve had always imagined it to be a fashion piece, or something that covered up some sort of a scar—he'd never imagined it was simply a way to protect what lay beneath.

There was no way to prepare him for the bright blue glow, the circular twist of metalwork bound to the center of the man's chest. Steve felt his breath catch in his throat and he had to force himself to swallow around the tight knot of unease.

"I know, it's not…not really pretty to look at but…" Stark murmured, twisting the metal circle with a few intricate flicks of his wrist before drawing an entire cylinder from between his ribs, "…it does the trick just fine. Can you pass me that file, please?"

Steve handed over the requested tool, though his thoughts were jackhammering out of control within his mind. *This* would explain the showboating, the allusion that no one could touch him, that no one could get close. Stark kept his secrets close to his chest, and boy, was this one hell of a secret.

"Captain? I need the 2.0mm Stanley. And then you have to hold this," Stark motioned to the glowing cylinder, which was clutched in his left hand. "I have to re-set a wire here and it's just easier if I have both hands. No hurry, though. Just the impending risk of cardiac arrest."

Though his hands quivered with a brief moment of nerves, Steve took quick charge, passing over the required screwdriver and holding the delicate machinery with hands that, thankfully, weren't trembling. He watched closely at Stark fiddled with a wire embedded in his chest, drawing it out and re-attaching it to the cylinder in Steve's hands. His eyes drifted to the hole left behind in Stark's chest, a network of hard-edged scars spiralling outward from a dark abyss. Of course he'd heard the rumors, knew of the kidnapping and the torture, and the resulting decision that nearly drowned Stark Industries as a company.

But that wasn't what he saw in the scattering of scars—he saw a survivor, someone who came back and beat the odds, who continued along his own path, despite outward influence. Steve swallowed around the lump in his throat.

This man, this vigilante he had been chasing across New York for close to a year now, with a hole in his chest the size of his fist, had grasped a hold of something inside of Steve he hadn't felt in years. Not since Sharon, and even then, he was certain it hadn't been anything quite like *this*.

+++

"Okay, I can take that off your hands now," Tony mumbled, reaching for the arc reactor with clammy hands. He could almost feel the jagged edges encroaching with each beat of his heart, and he would really rather not flatline at the moment. Not when he'd finally come to a decision. Not when things finally seemed right.

"Right. Here."

Tony was sure he would have felt a little thrill run through his system as his fingers brushed Steve's, but now wasn't the time. He carefully re-aligned the cylindrical casing, after checking to be sure that all the connectors were clear and would make proper contact, and snapped it back into place with a few swift twists of his wrist. Within moments he could feel the quiet buzz through his ribs, the comforting reminder that he was safe, that his heart wasn't about to be speared through with the remnants of shrapnel.

With a sigh, he settled back against the cool metal of the table, eyes sliding shut as his body slowly relaxed out of the icy panic it had been fighting against seconds prior. Tony had only meant to close his eyes for a second, but the distressed tone to the Captain's voice when he spoke said otherwise.

“Stark? Hey, come on. At least let me know you’re okay now.”

Tony allowed his eyes to open, just a slit, while a smirk wormed its way onto his lips. “I’m breathing, aren’t I?”

The joke didn’t seem to impress, a flat, bright blue glare leveled in his direction was all he received in response.

“Look, I’m fine. No harm, no foul,” he mumbled, slowly sitting up and not missing the way that the blond’s hand immediately went to his shoulder to aid him. Tony brushed it off with a smile. “Really.”

“Okay,” Steve answered, though his tone lacked conviction.

The seconds ticked by in silence until it started to grate on Tony’s nerves and he swung his legs over the edge of the table, watching the Captain carefully. “So…what is this? What are we doing here?” He motioned between the two of them, the mere foot of space separating them. “I mean, I know what I want but… Have you thought about what it is you want, Captain?”

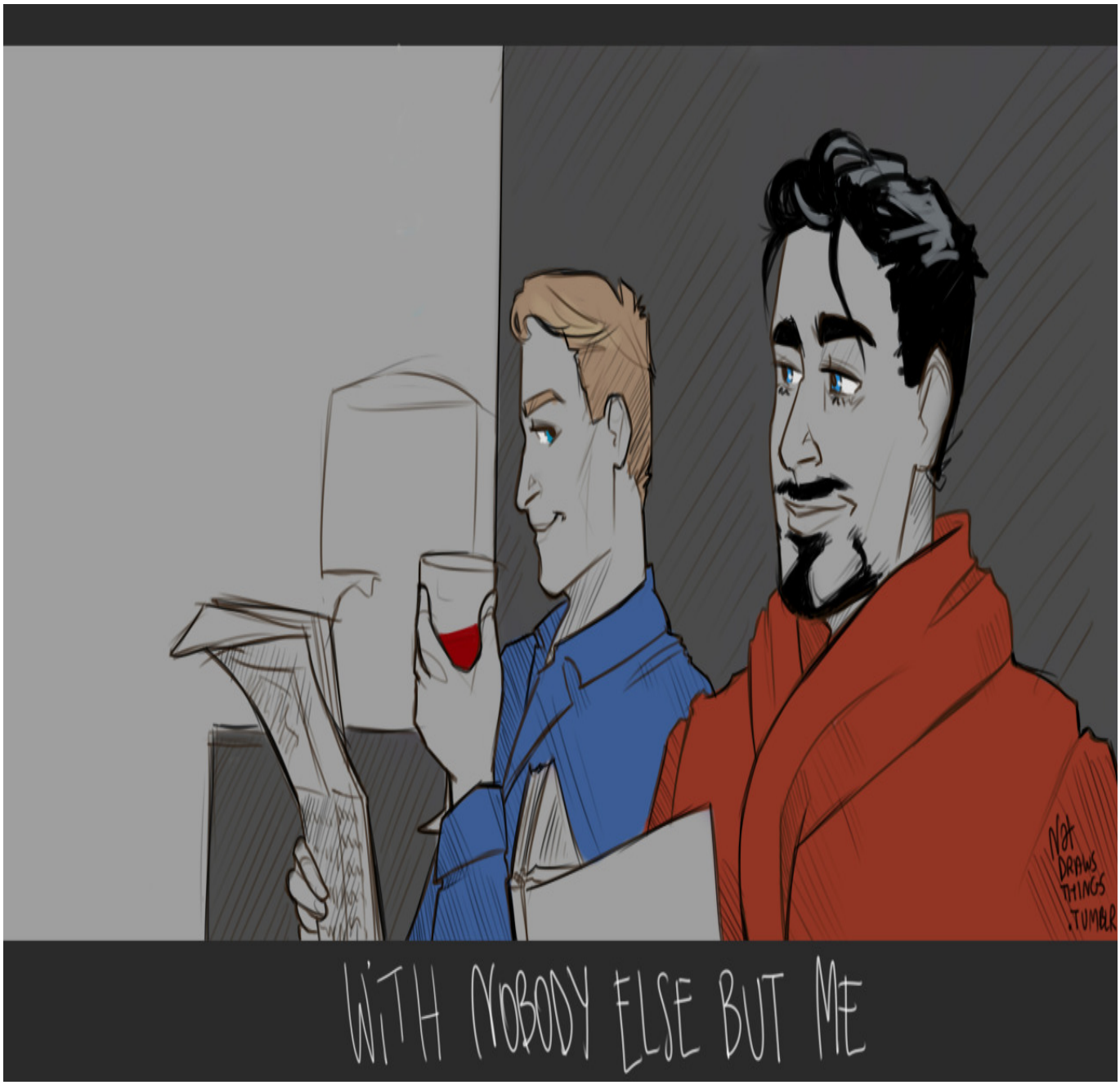
Tony waited, heart trembling anxiously in his chest as he watched a plethora of emotions filter across the Captain’s face. Finally, the man was frowning at him, though he seemed more amused than irate, and Steve let out a huff. “I thought that was obvious, Stark.”

For only an instant, Tony felt his throat constrict, thinking that this was it—the moment when SHIELD agents came sweeping into the workshop to arrest him. Instead, the blond moved forward and bridged the small gap between them, a hand curled reverently at the base of Tony’s skull as their lips brushed together. Tony sucked in a breath, moving to tangle his fingers in the front of the agent’s crisp dress shirt before Steve was pulling back, humming softly.

“*Nobody else but me.* ”

+++

Six Months Later



“And in current news, Iron Man has struck again, taking yet another priceless piece of artwork—this time from a private collection on loan to the Museum of Modern Art. There was no response when trying to get in touch with the owner of the collection, though both the museum and police force are ensuring the public that they are doing everything possible to—”

“Do you really have to watch that?”

“It’s just the news, Tony.”

Tony let out an indignant huff and rolled onto his side to watch the man beside him, alternatively reading the newspaper splayed open in his hands and sipping a glass of wine. The television played on in the background. “You’re not even watching it,” he protested, setting down the novel he hadn’t been paying attention to for at least the last five minutes. “And you’re *reading* a *newspaper*. Why are we watching the news?”

“I’m listening to it,” Steve chided, folding the paper and setting both it and his now-empty glass of wine on the bedside table. “Have to find out what you’ve been up to somehow, don’t I?”

“I told you what I was doing tonight.”

“Stealing from your own collection? Very bold,” the blond teased, leaning over to press a quick kiss to Tony’s lips, silencing him for all of three seconds before he broke away to speak.

“Come on now, I have to keep my image up somehow,” Tony mumbled, sliding his thumbs along a sharp jawline as he wriggled his way closer. He was halfway through opening the folds of Steve’s robe when the sleek black cell on the bedside table started blaring from somewhere beneath the newspaper. Tony groaned. “Don’t answer it.”

“I have to. You know that.” Steve sat up, effectively quelling Tony’s attempts to get him out of his clothes, and picked up the phone with a sharp, “Rogers, speaking.”

Tony only half-listened to the conversation, picking up his book from where he’d abandoned it, boredly leafing through the pages. He glanced up when Steve ended the conversation. “You have to go?”

Steve heaved a sigh. “I’m sorry. I’ll try to be quick.”

“If you’re not, Iron Man might have to swoop in and save your sorry butt.”

“Tony…”

“Kidding, kidding,” *mostly*, “be careful, okay?” Despite the fact that Steve had been an agent of SHIELD far longer than he or Tony had known each other, Tony couldn’t help but worry every time the man went out on a mission.

Steve bent down to press a chaste kiss to the side of Tony’s temple, a soft smile on his lips when they parted. “Always. See you soon.”

Tony watched his every motion as the blond pulled on his SHIELD-issued uniform and made sure to pick up his cell phone and keys before departing the room with a small wave. Once he was sure that Steve had left the house, Tony rolled over and buried his face in the other’s pillow with a groan.

“J, I am in way over my head, aren’t I?”

“I believe you may be overthinking, sir. Would you like me to connect you to Agent Rogers’ feed?”

“Yes,” he grumbled into the pillow, a smile brushing across his lips as he listened to Steve—no, the *Captain*—barking orders to his team. Somewhere along the line, he’d fallen **hard** for this man, and for the life of him, Tony couldn’t find it in himself to mind.

“—ony. *Tony*.”

Steve listened to his voice softly echo back to him in the darkness of the bedroom and a small grin crept onto his lips. “Thanks, J. You can shut off the feed now that I’m home,” he whispered, keeping his volume low to not wake the brunette curled around the pillow on Steve’s side of the

bed. He settled on the edge of the mattress, just watching the rise and fall of Tony's chest, the arc reactor glowing dimly against the sheets. Steve brushed a hand through wayward strands of dark hair before leaning down to press his lips to Tony's forehead.

"Hey. I'm home," he whispered, feeling his chest tighten at the thought of *home*. This had become more of a home to him than Steve could imagine, and he had to think a large part of it was due to the somewhat-reformed villain who still pretended to slumber in front of him. "C'mon, I know you're up."

Tony groaned and buried his face in the pillow. "'S'late…" he murmured against the folds of fabric.

Steve smiled, prying apart the clasps and buttons of his uniform between brushing his fingers through Tony's hair. "I know. Sorry, things took longer than expected. Though I imagine you heard all that."

Rolling his head against the pillow, Tony peered up at Steve, featured twisted in sleepy confusion. "What…?" His eyes went wide as he realized. "JARVIS! Did you not shut down the feed when Steve came back?!"

"I received no such instructions, sir."

Tony groaned and attempted to burrow himself beneath the bedding, only to feel the weight of Steve's warm palm against his shoulder. "I'm not upset. It's sweet, Tony."

"It's pathetic," he complained, peering over to Steve. In return for his efforts he was rewarded with a dazzling smile and a soft peck to his lips.

"You were just looking out for me. But I'm home, and you're right, it's late. So how about you scooch over and relinquish my pillow, Iron Man?"

"Not on your life, Captain," Tony argued, rolling to his side of the bed with the pillow still clutched against his chest.

Steve smiled.
He could get used to this.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!